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SUBJECT: GUATEMALAN VICE PRESIDENT SLAMS U.S. IMMIGRATION BILL

1. Vice President Eduardo Stein used the opportunity of a public address December 29 commemorating the ninth anniversary of the Peace Accords to strongly criticize pending legislation in the U.S. Congress concerning border security (HR4437 "Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act of 2005"). Stein stated it was "intolerable" to propose building a wall on the U.S.-Mexican border and to criminalize illegal immigration as a felony.

2. Stein said that the passage of the bill in the House of Representatives called into question what kind of friend the U.S. is to Latin America, noting that "It seems like an affront to all of Latin America that a government that calls itself friend and partner wants only our money and our markets, but views our people as a pest." He added, "We are going to have the need to readdress (our diplomatic relations) because they are only interested in our resources and riches, not our people."

3. Following his comments about the legislation, Stein noted that his government had a clear intention to develop stronger ties with "more responsible" nations, particularly those in South America. Stein also noted the need to conclude free trade agreements with Taiwan, Canada, Chile, and the European Union.

4. Foreign Minister Jorge Briz will meet in Mexico with his Mexican and Central American counterparts on January 9 to develop a joint position against the proposed legislation.

Comment

5. Stein's harsh and bitter comments reflect a widespread Guatemalan sentiment against the proposed immigration bill. The strong and continuous criticism about the bill has put the Government of Guatemala (GOG) on the defensive about its lack of initial reaction against the bill, with some critics comparing GOG officials unfavorably with their Mexican counterparts who were quick to denounce the proposal. At a personal level, Stein's anger likely reflects the frustration of GOG officials who feel that Guatemala receives less USG consideration than its Central American neighbors on issues such as eligibility for the Millennium Challenge Account, its request for Temporary Protected Status for its citizens resident in the United States, and implementation of the DR-Central American Free Trade Agreement.
DERHAM